DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 784 CS 507 578

AUTHOR Proctor, Russell F., II
TITLE Do the Ends Justify the Means? Thinking Critically about "Twelve Angry Men."
PUB DATE 14 Apr 91
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Critical Thinking; *Decision Making; Film Study; *Group Behavior; *Group Discussion; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; Persuasive Discourse; Thinking Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Twelve Angry Men

ABSTRACT

The classic film, "Twelve Angry Men," where a lone dissenting jury member (Henry Fonda) implores his fellow jurors not to make a quick decision in a murder trial, is often cited as a resource for analyzing decision-making processes in groups. The film, used in group-process courses to show how conformity pressures can hamper effective decision-making, originally seemed to demonstrate that good triumphs over evil. Repeated viewings, however, showed that Fonda's logic was often poor, and that he too used group pressure to get his adversaries to capitulate. It demonstrated that persuasion in groups can take place through a variety of methods, and that Fonda's method is also worthy of critical scrutiny. Since students tended to resist strongly any criticism of the hero after seeing the movie, the following exercise was developed to enlist the students' assistance in developing a case against Fonda. Before viewing the movie, half of the class received a "Fonda the Hero" handout, and the other half, one on "Fonda the Villain." After the movie, the two groups were given time to construct arguments for a debate on the subject. What ensued was a heated discussion allowing the teacher to apply concepts from lecture material such as: critical thinking, ethics in persuasion, task and maintenance roles, perception, bases of power, defensive communication, and principles of argumentation and debate. (Two handouts, "Fonda the Hero" and "Fonda the Villain," are attached.) (PRA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED336784

Do the Ends Justify the Means?: Thinking Critically About Twelve Angry Men

Russell F. Proctor II
Department of Interpersonal and Public Communication
Bowling Green State University

Presented at the Central States
Communication Association Annual Convention
Chicago, April 14, 1991

CS507578

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Russell Proctor II

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Do the Ends Justify the Means?:
Thinking Critically About Twelve Angry Men

Twelve Angry Men, the classic Sidney Lumet film starring Henry Fonda, is often cited as a resource for analyzing decision-making processes in groups (e.g., Brilhart & Gaines, 1989; Pfeiffer, 1972; Wood, Phillips, & Pedersen, 1986). The movie portrays a sequestered jury intent upon handing down a quick guilty verdict in a murder case. The Henry Fonda character is the lone dissenter; he implores his fellow jury members not to make a hasty decision. By calling into question the integrity of the evidence, the testimonies of the witnesses, and the prejudices of the jurors, the Fonda character leads twelve angry men to a decision of "not guilty."

I have been using this film for several years in my group-process courses to show how conformity pressures can hamper effective decision-making. On the surface, the moral of the story seems to be that good triumphs over evil through the efforts of a heroic critical thinker (I'll refer to this character simply as "Fonda"). Fonda raises questions, encourages quiet members to offer their opinions, and fights against the tyranny of bigotry. My students enjoy the happy-ending story and are more than willing to applaud Fonda for his excellence in communication.

After repeated viewings of the movie, however, I became increasingly troubled by some of Fonda's tactics. Though he engages in critical thinking about some issues, his logic is extremely poor about others. He rewards only the jurors who agree with him and berates those who disagree; clearly he is not impartial. Group pressure, which works against him at the outset of the story, is the primary tool Fonda uses to get his adversaries to capitulate. By attending to the maintenance needs of quiet jurors who would be overmatched without his support, Fonda turns the tide of conformity in his favor. The moral of the story is not necessarily the triumph of good over evil, for the defendant's innocence is unclear at the film's conclusion. Instead, what the story demonstrates is that persuasion in groups can take place through a variety of methods--and Fonda's method is as worthy of critical scrutiny as any of the others employed during the jury's deliberations.

After arriving at these conclusions about the movie, I looked forward to sharing them with my students. I screened the film privately, taking notes and compiling my ammunition. Naively, I expected nods of enlightened agreement when I presented my case against Fonda. What I did not count on was the students' unwillingness to call into question the hero in the white suit. Their response was actually hostile. Because they viewed Fonda uncritically, they saw him as the one character who was above reproach. By daring to discredit their hero, I was judged as being beneath reproach!

My solution to the problem was the birth of this exercise. Rather than trying to persuade students that Fonda's strategies are dubious, I decided to enlist their assistance in developing a case against him. When I next used the film, I gave half the class a "Fonda the Hero" handout; the other half received "Fonda the Villain" instructions (the assignments were kept confidential). After viewing the movie, the two groups were given time to construct arguments for the "trial" of Fonda. The ensuing class session was devoted to a debate in which the "pro" and "con" sides attempted to vindicate/indict Fonda. The "trial" was an intense--and sometimes heated--class discussion. I wrapped up the session by offering summaries of both positions and making applications of concepts from lecture material.

The exercise provides a doorway for discussing a variety of issues, including:

(1) Critical thinking (by both the jury and the film-viewers)

(2) Ethics in persuasion (is it appropriate for Fonda to use any means to achieve his ends as long as he believes he is defending the cause of justice?)

(3) Task and maintenance roles in group process (and the impact they have on persuasion)

(4) Perception (if Fonda and the defendant are viewed as villains, how does it alter one's perception of the jury's deliberations?)

(5) Bases of power (French & Raven, 1968)

(6) Defensive communication (Gibb, 1961)

(7) Principles of argumentation and debate (particularly if the instructor uses a formal debate structure for this exercise)

Twelve Angry Men is available in both film and video formats; despite its age, the storyline and acting are not dated. Student response to the movie--and this exercise--has been positive and strong.

References

Brilhart, J. K., & Gaines, G. J. (1989). Effective group discussion (6th ed.). Dubuque: Brown.

French, J. R. P., & Raven, B. H. (1968). The bases of social power. In D. Cartwright & A. Zander (Eds.), Group dynamics: Research and theory (pp. 259-269). New York: Harper & Row.

Gibb, J. (1961). Defensive communication. Journal of Communication, 11, 141-148.

Pfeiffer, J. W. (Ed.). (1972). Handbook for group facilitation. San Diego: University Associates.

Wood, J. T., Phillips, G. M., & Pedersen, D. J. (1986). Group discussion: A practical guide to leadership and participation (2nd ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

HANDOUT #1

FONDA THE HERO

Henry Fonda's character can be seen as the "hero" of the movie Twelve Angry Men. His heroics are due in part to his effective implementation of communication skills we have discussed in this class. Watch for and take notes on his use of the following:

--CRITICAL THINKING

--CREATIVE THINKING

--RESISTING PRESSURES TO CONFORM

--PLAYING "DEVIL'S ADVOCATE"

--GATEKEEPING

--REWARDING

--ATTENDING

--EMPATHIZING

HANDOUT #2

FONDA THE VILLAIN

Henry Fonda's character is usually viewed as the "hero" of the movie Twelve Angry Men. Your assignment, however, is to view him critically, looking for weaknesses in his case and his tactics. Watch for and take notes on how he:

--Employs REWARDING, ATTENDING, GATEKEEPING, and EMPATHIZING only with those who agree with him, while berating and/or ignoring those who disagree with him

--Avoids CRITICAL THINKING regarding his own arguments, though he carefully critiques opposing arguments (listen for flaws in his logic)

--Engages in behaviors related to Gibb's DEFENSIVE CLIMATE (i.e., Certainty vs. Provisionalism, Control vs. Problem-orientation, Strategy vs. Spontaneity)

--Imposes PRESSURES TO CONFORM on his adversaries

Imagine that you know for a fact that the defendant is guilty (you saw him commit the crime). This should assist you in your job of viewing Fonda critically.